



## The Warsaw Ghetto 'Uprising' Jewish Insurrection or German Police Operation?

*By Robert Faurisson*

Each year, around April 19, the media and politicians commemorate what they call the Warsaw ghetto 'uprising,' 'revolt' or 'insurrection.' [1] In journalistic accounts the affair has taken on increasingly epic and symbolic proportions. At a Holocaust ceremony in New York in April 1993, American Vice President Al Gore declared: 'The story of the Warsaw ghetto is sacred text for our time.' [2] In fact, this 'story' is a legend based only partially on historical reality.

'An insurrection never took place.' [3] This remark is by Marek Edelman, who was a leader of one of the armed Jewish groups in the ghetto. He added: 'We didn't even choose the day; the Germans set it by entering the ghetto to find the last Jews.' Edelman also stated that the number of Jews who took up arms never exceeded 220. (Other estimates of the number of Jewish ghetto fighters range from several hundred to as many as 2,000. In any case, no more than a minute portion of the ghetto population took part in the fighting.) [4]

Edelman's view has been confirmed by Yitzhak Zuckerman, another leader of the main Jewish armed group in the ghetto. Zuckerman has defined the 'war aims' of the Jewish fighters in these words: 'For us it was a question of organizing a defense, not an uprising. In an uprising, the initiative is with the one rising up. We, we sought only to defend ourselves; the initiative was entirely on the side of the Germans.' [5]

This was no uprising of an entire community to gain its freedom or to resist deportation. It was, rather, the reaction of only a relative handful of young Jews who, seeing German troops penetrate their sanctuary, first fought back, then on the third day tried unsuccessfully to flee, and then, finally, surrounded, put up sustained armed resistance. [6]

The whole thing should more accurately be called a German police operation rather than an 'uprising' or 'insurrection' by the Jews of Warsaw. By contrast, a real uprising was staged in Warsaw, August-October 1944, by the Polish Home Army, commanded by General 'Bor' Komorowski. However, the media scarcely notes this heroic insurrection, which the Soviets allowed the Germans to crush at their leisure. The Poles fought with such courage that the Germans permitted them to surrender with full military honors, treating them as prisoners of war under the Geneva convention rather than as terrorist insurgents.

To understand what happened in the Warsaw ghetto in April-May 1943, it is important to know why the Germans decided to launch a police operation. In the city's 'Jewish quarter' or 'ghetto' were 36,000 officially registered residents, as well as, in all probability, more than 20,000 clandestine inhabitants. [7] The ghetto was, in a sense, a city within a city, administered by a 'Jewish Council' (*Judenrat*), and a Jewish police force, which collaborated with the German occupation authorities, even against Jewish 'terrorists.' Many thousands of Jewish workers toiled in ghetto workshops and factories, supplying products vital to the German war effort.

Following the first Soviet air attack against central Warsaw on August 21, 1942, bomb shelters were built, on German orders, everywhere in the city, including the ghetto, for the protection of the residents. The Germans furnished the Jews with the cement and other necessary materials for these shelters, which legend has transformed into 'blockhouses' and 'bunkers.' [8] So extensive was this 'network of subterranean refuges and hiding places' that, according to one prominent Holocaust historian, 'in the end, every Jew in the ghetto had his own spot in one of the shelters set up in the central part of the ghetto.' [9]

Small armed Jewish groups, numbering no more than 220 persons, were active. The most important of these was the 'Jewish Combat Organization' (JCO), whose members were mostly young men in their twenties. Its 'general directives for combat' specified 'acts of terror' against the Jewish police, the Jewish Council, and the *Werkschutz* (protection service for the factories and workshops). This JCO directive stated specifically: 'The general staff works out the central plan of action -- sabotage and terror -- directed against the enemy.' [10]

Accordingly, these 'fighters' or 'terrorists' used 'sabotage and terror' to shake down Jewish ghetto police, Jewish Council officials, and workshop guards. [11] The 'terrorists' also profited from the ghetto's intensive industrial and commercial life, shaking down merchants and other residents by threat and blackmail, even holding them prisoner in their homes for

ransom. They were able to buy weapons from soldiers stationed in Warsaw, who, like troops stationed elsewhere well behind the front lines, often served in patchwork units, ill-trained and poorly motivated. The ghetto 'terrorists' even carried out murderous attacks against German troops and Jewish collaborators.

The ghetto became increasingly insecure. Because of this, the Polish population became more and more hostile to its existence, while the Germans, for their part, feared that it could become a threat to the city's important role as a rail nexus in the war economy and as a hub for transport of troops to the Eastern front. Himmler therefore decided to relocate the Jewish population, along with the workshops and factories, to the Lublin region, and to raze the ghetto, replacing it with a park. At first the Germans tried to convince the Jews to voluntarily accept relocation. But the 'terrorists' refused to accept this, aware that such a transfer would mean for them losing, simultaneously, their financial base as well as their freedom of movement. They devoted all their efforts to opposing this, until on April 19, 1943, a police operation to forcibly evacuate the remaining Jews was begun on Himmler's order.

At 6:00 a.m. that morning, troops under the command of SS Colonel Ferdinand von Sammern-Frankenegg entered the ghetto, supported by a single tracked vehicle (captured during the invasion of France) and two armored cars. Initially the 'terrorists' or guerrillas offered stiff resistance, wounding 16 German SS men, six Ukrainians (so-called 'Askaris'), and two Polish policemen. One Polish policeman was killed. [12]

Himmler, eager to minimize casualties, was angered. That same morning, he relieved von Sammern-Frankenegg of command and replaced him with SS General Jürgen Stroop. Stroop, ordered to carry out the operation slowly to minimize casualties, did so in the following manner: each morning, the troops would enter the ghetto, clear buildings of their residents and use smoke candles (not poison gas) to drive out the Jews hiding in the air-raid shelters; the buildings were destroyed as they were evacuated. Each evening the troops sealed the ghetto so that nobody could escape during the night.

Skirmishes lasted from April 19 to May 16, 1943, so that altogether the operation required 28 days. On the third day, many of the Jewish armed fighters tried to escape, most of whom were shot or captured. Contrary to some reports, the German command never called for air support to destroy the ghetto, and the operation involved no aerial bombardment.

The number of Jewish dead is unknown. [13] An often-cited figure of 56,065 is, in fact, the number of Jews who were *apprehended*. The great majority of these were deported, many to the transit camp at Treblinka from where they were taken to Majdanek (Lublin). [14] German deaths in the operation totalled 16. (This included one Polish policeman.)

One should not doubt either the courage of the Jewish resistance in the ghetto or the tragic nature of the whole affair, with the civilian population trapped in the cross-fire between various heterogeneous German units and small groups of Jewish guerrillas scattered throughout the ghetto. Contrary to some grandiose propaganda claims, though, what took place was far from an 'apocalyptic' revolt, as one writer has recently called it, [15] particularly when one is mindful of the tens of thousands of deaths, civilian and military, that occurred during those same 28 days, on battlefields around the globe and in the European cities bombarded by British and American air forces. [16]

## NOTES

1. In the entry, 'Warsaw Ghetto Uprising,' in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York: 1990), historian Israel Gutman writes: 'The Warsaw ghetto uprising was the first instance in occupied Europe of an uprising by an urban population. Its unique feature was the fact that it was a general rebellion in which armed fighters took part together with masses of Jews hiding out in bunkers and refuges.' (Vol. 4, p. 1631).
2. S. Birnbaum, JTA dispatch, *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California* (San Francisco), April 23, 1993, p. 9.
3. *Libération* (Paris), April 18, 1988, p. 27.; In an interview published in the Austrian news magazine *Profil*, April 19, 1993, p. 86, Edelman likewise referred to 'our 200 fighters.'
4. Israeli Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer contends that altogether there were 750 Jewish ghetto fighters, organized in two combat organizations. See: Y. Bauer, *A History of the Holocaust* (New York: 1982), p. 262. According to Jewish Holocaust specialist Israel Gutman, 'the total Jewish fighting forces in the ghetto numbered 700 to 750.' See: *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York, 1990), Vol. 4, p. 1628. Holocaust historian Raul Hilberg likewise puts the 'total armed strength' of the Jewish ghetto fighters at 'about 750.' See: R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Holmes & Meier, 1985), p. 512. Richard Lukas, a specialist of Polish history, cites estimates of between 1,000 and 2,000 Jewish ghetto fighters, noting that the combatants were thus only about three to five percent of the ghetto's population. See: Richard C. Lukas, *The Forgotten Holocaust: The Poles Under German Occupation, 1939-1944* (Lexington, Ky.: 1986), pp. 172, 178, 267 (n. 106). Jewish historian Ber Mark contends that there were perhaps a thousand 'organized' Jewish fighters, with many others helping in the struggle. See: Ber Mark, *Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto* (New York: Schocken, 1975) p. 15, and, Ber Mark, 'The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising,' in: Yuri Suhl, ed., *They Fought Back* (1967), p. 93.
5. N. Weill, 'L'Insurrection du ghetto de Varsovie,' *Le Monde* (Paris), April 18-19, 1993, p. 2.; Zuckerman (1915-1981), whose name is sometimes spelled 'Cukierman,' was also known by his *nom de guerre*, 'Antek.' His memoir

- was published in 1993 under the title *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (Univ. of Calif. Press).
6. Forty survivors of the original group of 200 fighters, including Marek Edelman, succeeded in escaping from the ghetto, May 8-10, 1943. See: M. Edelman interview in *Profil* (Vienna), April 19, 1993, p. 86.
  7. Even though it had a wall around it, the Warsaw ghetto was largely 'open.' In this sense, it deserved to be designated as a 'residential district' or 'quarter' rather than a 'ghetto.'
  8. See: Leon Poliakov, *Harvest of Hate* (New York: 1979), p. 230.
  9. Israel Gutman, 'Warsaw Ghetto Uprising,' *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York: 1990), p. 1628.
  10. Cited by Adam Rutkowski in an article reprinted in a special issue of the French periodical, *Le Monde Juif*, April-August 1993, p. 162.; The 'Jewish Combat Organization' (JCO) or 'Jewish Fighting Organization,' was known in Polish as the 'Żydowska Organizacja Bojowa' (ZOB);  
 Details about the methods employed by the JCO are provided by Yisrael Gutman in his book, *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939-1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt* (1982), pp. 344-349.  
 These methods scarcely differed from those of the Mafia. The Germans knew that they faced strong opposition. They sought to convince the Jews to allow themselves to be transferred to the Lublin region, along with the factories and workshops that served the German war effort. In March 1943 a strange 'poster war' took place between the Jewish Combat Organization (JCO) and Walter C. Többens, who was responsible for evacuating the Jews. The JCO's notices called on the Jewish residents to refuse transfer to what it called the death camps. The Germans left these handbills in place, content to put up alongside them notices signed 'Walter C. Többens,' in which the claims of the JCO were refuted point by point.  
 Gutman acknowledges: 'Többens told the truth about these transports; they weren't to death camps, and it is a fact that there were buildings for *integrating* the factories [in the Lublin region]. But at the time the resistance and the suspicions of the Jews were so strong that even the most ingenious tactics weren't able to overcome them.' (pp. 334-335) It was only after determining that methods of persuasion had been stymied that the Germans decided on their police operation.
  11. On these points, as well as many others, see, notably:  
*The Jews of Warsaw, 1939-1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt*, by Yisrael Gutman, translated from the Hebrew by Ina Friedman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982, 487+xxii pages), and, *Il y a 50 ans: le soulèvement du ghetto de Varsovie* ('Fifty Years Ago: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising'), special edition of *Le Monde Juif*, April-August 1993, 336 pages.  
 The latter work includes a reprint of an article by Adam Rutkowski, published in 1969 under the title 'Quelques documents sur la révolte du ghetto de Varsovie' ('Some Documents on the Warsaw Ghetto Revolt'), pp. 160-169. On page 162 appear the 'general directives for combat of the Jewish Combat Organization.'
  12. The 'Stroop Report,' dated May 16, 1943, is entitled 'Es gibt keinen jüdischen Wohnbezirk in Warschau mehr!' ('The Jewish Residential District in Warsaw Is No More!'). Text published as Nuremberg document PS-1061 (USA-275) in: International Military Tribunal, *Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal* ('blue series'), Vol. 26, pp. 628-694, followed by a selection of 18 photographs (of 52). A purported facsimile edition of the German original of this report, including Stroop's telex reports, along with an English-language translation, has been published in the US as: *The Stroop Report: The Jewish Quarter in Warsaw Is No More!* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), Translated from the German and annotated by Sybil Milton, Introduction by Andrzej Wirth.
  13. In his telex report of May 24, 1943, General Stroop stated: 'Of the total 56,065 Jews apprehended, about 7,000 were annihilated directly in the course of the large-scale operation in the former Jewish quarter. 6,929 Jews were destroyed through transport to T II [an apparent reference to the Treblinka II camp], making a total of 13,929 annihilated Jews. In addition to this figure of 56,065, an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 Jews were annihilated in explosions or fires.' See: The Stroop Report (New York: 1979), [pages not numbered].  
 In the entry, 'Warsaw Ghetto Uprising,' in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (p. 1630), Israel Gutman writes: 'On May 16 Stroop announced that the fighting was over and that 'we succeeded in capturing altogether 56,065 Jews, that is, definitely destroying them!'. The words ascribed here to Stroop are not accurate. What he actually wrote in his report of May 16 is this: 'The total number of Jews apprehended or confirmed destroyed is 56,065.'
  14. 'After the people had been taken out of the Ghetto -- they numbered between 50,000 and 60,000 -- they were brought to the railway station. The Security Police [*Sicherheits-polizei*] had complete supervision of these people and were in charge of the transport of these people to Lublin.' From an affidavit of Jürgen Stroop, which was quoted as document 3841-PS (USA-804) by American prosecutor Col. Amen at the Nuremberg Tribunal on April 12, 1946. Text published in: International Military Tribunal, *Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal* ('blue series'), Vol. 11, pp. 354-355.
  15. 'The terrible, exemplary, and apocalyptic revolt of the inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto is at once an act of despair and of heroism.' See: D. Desthomas, *La Montagne*, April 17, 1993, p. 12.
  16. Exaggerations about 'the Warsaw ghetto uprising' appear regularly in the media around the world. A comparison of exaggerations and inventions in the Brazilian press on this subject with the facts recently appeared in a revisionist periodical in Brazil. See: S.E. Castan, 'Documento: A Verdadeira História do Levante do Gueto de Varsóvia,' *Boletim-EP (Esclarecimento ao País)*, June 1993, pp. 7-14. Address: *Boletim-EP*, Caixa Postal 11.011, Ag. Menino Deus, 90880-970 Porto Alegre, RS, Brazil.
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